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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000955

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: COMMUNAL TENSION CONTINUES OVER
"UNAUTHORIZED" BUDDHA STATUE

REF: A. COLOMBO 0916

1B. COLOMBO 921

11. (SBU) Summary: Religious and ethnic tensions continue to percolate in Trincomalee over the May 16 erection of a large Buddha statue on public land in the city center. A May 18 decision by a local judge ordering the removal of the statue has not yet been implemented, and the statue remains, behind barbed wire and guarded by local police, in its controversial location. A Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) front organization, which launched a four-day strike that crippled businesses and transportation in the city from May 17-20, has decided to give authorities until June 2 to remove the statue before contemplating resumed strikes. The ethnically polarizing machinations by government coalition partner Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which instigated the placement of the statue, and the LTTE, which instigated the strike and the demand for the statue's removal, seem calculated to ensure even greater violence and instability in this troubled district. End summary.

12. (U) The Tamil People's Forum, a heretofore-unknown group widely assumed to be a front for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), decided late May 25 to give Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) authorities until June 2 to implement the Trincomalee magistrate's May 18 order to remove a large Buddha statue from municipal council land in Trincomalee (Ref A) before resuming protests. The Forum had called a four-day strike, or "hartal," that shut down businesses and vehicular traffic in Trincomalee town May 17-20 to protest the statue's placement on public property in the ethnically diverse area. The Forum's decision followed a four-hour meeting May 25 between Forum representatives and Tamil National Alliance (TNA) MPs and Government-appointed mediators. The meeting, chaired by Governor of the North-East Tyronne Fernando, included two Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) heavyweights, River Basin Development Minister Maithripala Sirisena and Deputy Minister of Ports and Aviation Dilan Perera, considered especially "tough" on the Sinhalese nationalist coalition partner, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which instigated the placement of the statue on public land leased to one of its unions. Participants in the meeting also decided to seek the assistance of the Attorney General in implementing the magistrate's order to remove the statue. Prior to that meeting, President Chandrika Kumaratunga reportedly met R. Sampanthan, TNA MP for Trincomalee, and urged him to find an amicable solution to the confrontation.

13. (U) The statue--now surrounded by barbed wire, sand bags and armed guards--remains in its contested location, despite the magistrate's May 18 ruling. On May 25 the magistrate reaffirmed that order, again directing police and the Urban Council to remove the statue, as well as any other "unauthorized" religious structures found elsewhere in the city on public land. (Note: Neither order imposes a specific deadline for the removal of the statue. End note.) Further heightening tensions on May 25, a former Tamil Chairman of the Trincomalee Urban Council, who had been shot in the sporadic violence accompanying the hartal on May 18, died of his injuries.

14. (SBU) In a May 20 conversation with poloff, TNA MP Sampanthan acknowledged that there appeared no immediate, practicable resolution to the confrontation that would be mutually satisfactory to all parties. Complicating matters, he alleged, is the "mono-ethnic" (i.e., Sinhalese) composition of GSL security forces in the ethnically diverse district. Moreover, the "unauthorized" Hindu structures cited by the JVP in response to the magistrate's ruling are largely located in predominantly Hindu neighborhoods, he averred; in contrast, the Buddha statue was deliberately placed in a prominent public location frequented by all three ethnic groups. (Note: A total of 33 "unauthorized" religious structures of various kinds--but most of them small Hindu shrines--reportedly have been identified on public land in Trincomalee.) Nonetheless, he emphasized, he was working hard to try to defuse the situation, including pressing hard for a suspension of the hartal during Buddhist holidays May

21-24.

15. (SBU) Comment: Now that the Buddha statue is up, it will be very difficult to get it down, court order or not, without further violence and confrontation. The stakes are high for both the LTTE and JVP, which are each manipulating the face-off to prove their claims to influence and popularity in this ethnically diverse district. The decision to give the GSL a week of breathing space to implement the court order is a welcome sign of flexibility--and probably no small tribute to Sampanthan's hard work and personal commitment to trying to defuse the crisis. That said, the GSL's typically risk-averse approach to other contentious issues, including its apparent reluctance to prosecute perpetrators of attacks on Christian churches (Ref B), gives us little hope of a resolution soon.

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